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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the findings of Year 1 of a three-year project, funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, to study the implementation of the First Steps Literacy Program in a New England urban school district. The study is informed by theories of literacy that view reading, writing, and language as integrated components of a process; development in one area facilitates development in the others. Effective instruction is informed by ongoing assessment and provides opportunities for immersion, modeling, relevant feedback, diverse opportunities to use language in purposeful ways, and by current research on teacher development and curriculum change that view professional growth as situational and socially constructed. First Steps, originally developed in Australia, is a holistic, developmentally sequenced approach to literacy instruction designed to give teachers explicit ways of mapping children's progress through observation--it links assessment and instruction and creates a support system for ongoing professional development. The qualitative study focused on the nature and response to First Steps professional development. Observations were made in eight elementary schools implementing First Steps in the 1996-97 academic year; four schools were selected for case studies. Data were collected by surveys, focus groups, interviews, and observations. Data to date indicate that several professional development indicators appear to be present in the First Steps professional development model as implemented in Southtown. Moving into the second year, data indicate that First Steps personnel are rethinking their role and identifying new ways in which they can most effectively support teachers. (Contains 12 references.) (NKA)

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Something Old, Something New: Issues Arising from the Implementation of a Holistic Literacy Program within an Urban School System

by
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In his 1996 Presidential address to the National Reading Conference, Dick Allington cautioned that much of the current research on literacy is being conducted in a "too small box." He called for research studies that focus on developing an understanding of literacy within a bigger context. Responding to this call, this paper reports on the findings of Year 1 of a three year project, funded by OERI, to study the implementation of the First Steps Literacy Program in a New England urban school district. A collaboration between a graduate school of teacher education, Southtown - an urban New England Public School District, and a major publishing company, this study is designed to look systematically at school culture, teacher beliefs, professional development experiences, instructional practices, student literacy achievement, and the ways in which these affect each other.

The study is informed by theories of literacy that view reading, writing, and language as integrated components of a process; development in one area facilitates development in the other two. Effective instruction is informed by ongoing assessment and provides opportunities for immersion, modeling, relevant feedback, and diverse opportunities to use language in purposeful ways (Cunningham and Allington, 1994; Clay, 1991; Cambourne, 1995). It is further informed by the current research on teacher development and curriculum

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change that view professional growth as situational and socially constructed (Hargreaves, 1996; McLaughlin,1991). Like their students, teachers are seen as learning and growing over time through interactions within a specific context. As Hargreaves writes:

> *One's teaching, what one knows about teaching, and what one believes is possible and desirable in one's teaching all vary according to the context in which the teaching is done. (Hargreaves, 1996, p.15)*

Background: What is First Steps?

Calling itself a literacy resource, First Steps is a holistic, developmentally sequenced approach to literacy instruction designed to give teachers explicit ways of mapping children's progress through observation. First Steps defines itself not as "something new" but as a systematic organization of best practice that: 1. links assessment and instruction 2. creates a support system for ongoing professional development. The First Steps instructional model is based upon the valuing of teacher scaffolding and interactive student participation with teachers, peers, and content matter. It is supported by Vygotsky's vision of cultural development in which "individuals transform social experiences into individual mental functions" (Kubeck and Beck, 1997, p.290).

First developed by the Western Australia Department of Education in 1989, First Steps has been implemented in diverse settings in the United States since 1995. The program has four central tenets: First, effective teaching practices have a significant effect on student outcomes. Second, the full school community needs to be involved in and take ownership of professional development. Third, the principal serves as a facilitator for the teachers as they learn new professional practices. Fourth, parents and teachers work together by

sharing their understanding of children's growth, development, and literacy experiences.

This paper focuses on the second tenet - the nature of and response to First Steps professional development. It will:

- describe and analyze the professional development provided to Southtown teachers
- describe and analyze teachers' responses to First Steps professional development
- identify obstacles to teachers' growth and development derived from unconfirmed assumptions about teachers' literacy beliefs and practices
- report the ways in which participants, informed by experience, have adjusted the professional development experience to better meet the needs of the district and its teachers.

Research Methodology

The study is qualitative in design. Four in-depth case studies coupled with both comparative and cross-case analyses enable researchers to seek out continuities, consistencies, and patterns of meaning throughout the process of implementation of new literacy practices and anticipated school-wide change (Yin, 1984; Clandinin & Connelly, 1995).

The study began in October, 1996. Guided by recommendations from central office administrators and the insight of First Steps personnel, observations were made in eight of the eighteen district elementary schools implementing First Steps in the 1996-97 academic year. Following these observations and related discussions with teachers, administrators, and First Steps personnel, four schools were identified as case study sites. In each school,

both teachers and administrators voiced interest in collaborating in a longitudinal study of the impact of the First Steps implementation.

The selection of the four case study schools was conceptualized as four parts of a whole. Together, they represent a broad range of school culture, belief systems and teaching practices selected to inform our understanding of the effectiveness of First Steps within diverse contexts. Since a goal of the study was to explore the relationship between school context, student achievement, and program implementation, preference was given to schools having different and distinct vision statements and clearly articulated plans for meeting the literacy needs of the students they serve.

Data Sources

Data has been collected from a broad range of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include information obtained from parents, teachers, students, and administrators via surveys, focus groups, individual interviews, and observations.

Surveys (parents, teachers, administrators):

Surveys were designed and administered to selected samples from each population in order to identify perceived needs, visions of teachers and teaching, attitudes toward learning, and understandings about the literacy process.

Focus Groups (district tutors, teachers, parents, students):

Focus group discussions were held throughout the 1996-97 academic year. Four distinct populations participated in separate focus groups: district tutors (monthly), classroom teachers (3 sessions in each school), parents (one session in

each school), and students (1 session in each school). The discussions were recorded and transcribed.

Interviews (district tutors, selected teachers, administrators):

These 30 to 45 minute interviews have enabled participants and researchers to explore issues related to study goals in greater depth. Interviews have been recorded and transcribed with the permission of the participants.

Observations (selected classrooms K-5):

Initial observations were made in a random selection of classrooms participating in First Steps. Subsequent observations, coupled with interviews, provided additional insights into existing literacy beliefs and practices, individual school culture, population differences, and the impact of prior attitudes and current expectations on First Steps' implementation.

Secondary Sources

A review of documentation including but not limited to current standardized test scores (Iowa and MEAP), First Steps program materials, student work samples, report cards, school action plans, district directives, state mandates, and state curriculum frameworks provided additional data regarding the philosophy and practice of literacy instruction in Southtown.

First Steps Professional Development

First Steps Professional Development is composed of a range of learning experiences for teachers and administrators. These include initial intensive two day training sessions focused on each of the curriculum areas (reading, writing, spelling, oral language) being implemented in a district, support workshops, listservs, teleconferences, and alumni conferences. In addition, in Southtown, a

First Steps trainer has been given an office in the district in return for four days a month of professional consultation to the district.

The aforementioned assumptions of First Steps, that it is "nothing new" and that it is a compilation of "best practice" frame the role of teacher and learner within the First Steps classroom. These assumptions encompass the following beliefs:

- Literacy learning takes place through interactions in meaningful contexts.
- Explicit teaching of skills can and should be embedded, as needed, in meaningful contexts.
- Literacy learning develops through the active engagement of learners.
- All teachers can and should be designers of curriculum.
- Literacy learning is most effective when it is co-constructed by teachers and students working together.

and, perhaps most fundamental of all,

- All children can learn.

How profoundly this final belief is held is attested to in the following quotation. When asked what distinguishes a school that implements the philosophy and practices of First Steps, Alison Dewsbury from the Education Department of Western Australia responded:

> *As long as you hold to a mindset of a deficit model, children will never succeed. When somebody asks me, "What is the difference between a First Steps school and a non-First Steps school?" I often reply, "Well, if in Perth I went into a non-First Steps school which was in a really tough area, full of dedicated, lovely teachers who really cared about children, and I said to a teacher, an experienced teacher: 'Tell me about that child.' The teacher might say something like, 'Well, he's a great little guy, but*

my word, he has problems. He has no language; we've got nothing to build on, you know. We'll do what we can, but life is hard.'

And if I went to an identical school with an identical staff that was a First Steps school, and I asked the same question, the teacher would say, 'It's a miracle. You cannot believe, how clever he is. When he came here he could do this and this. Now he can do this and this.' And then they would say to the child, 'Show her', and the child would take me into the class --it's happened to me so many times, it's not funny-- and I would be there for as long as I chose to stay, being shown evidence by the child of his or her triumphs.

(Dewsbury, First Steps Director, May 15, 1997)

The First Steps Professional Development Experience in Southtown

Teachers' initial responses to the information offered in the First Steps professional training sessions were quite enthusiastic. Across the schools, teachers agreed that through the initial experiences and subsequent classroom - based support, they were coming to understand:

- a more coordinated approach to planning and pedagogy
- a shared language for describing children's strengths and needs
- a shared language for setting goals
- the value of setting higher expectations for student performance
- a set of strategies for attaining these higher expectations
- a better understanding of what it means to integrate reading and writing

Nonetheless, the degree to which teachers have been able to implement these understandings in consistent ways appears to be quite varied. Some teachers immediately integrated what they had learned into their classroom practice. Others reported a complete understanding of what had been taught but actually implemented First Steps as a set of isolated activities, integrated neither from activity to activity nor with other aspects of the classroom curriculum. Still other teachers found their entree into First Steps exciting but confusing. They felt they were being introduced to a set of practices that could be useful to them, but they could not quite figure out how to implement them in a cohesive way within the context of their own classrooms. In interviews and focus groups, this set of teachers frequently made such comments as: "It was clear at the time, but then when I thought about it later it was overwhelming."

Understanding the Diverse Responses of Southtown Teachers

To make sense of the variation in these responses, we looked to the literature on professional development and curriculum innovation. Here we found clearly articulated indicators of what distinguishes effective professional development, the kind of professional development that facilitates and sustains teacher development through curriculum innovation (McLaughlin, 1990; Hargreaves, 1996, Fullan, 1991). These indicators include:

- a mixture of specific skills training and more cognitively oriented support that helps teachers to develop broader problem solving strategies
- teachers' belief in their own efficacy
- a school culture that nurtures teachers' feelings of professionalism

- explicitly articulated ways of integrating the curriculum innovation into the existing skills, understandings, and attitudes of the teachers for whom the innovation is being planned
- clearly articulated ways of integrating the professional development/ school innovation into existing goals and practices
- district and school based commitment and support for the innovation coupled with leadership that guides the innovation

Looking Through the Lens of Research on Effective Professional Development

Data to date indicates that these professional development indicators appear to be present in the First Steps professional development model as implemented in Southtown. Professional development experiences have included both specific skills training and opportunities for identifying and hypothesizing solutions to problems that arise during the implementation phase.

Skills training has been both broad based and sharply focused. It has provided instruction in how to observe and assess children's literacy performance and how to connect this information to meaningful and relevant instruction. Moreover, district tutors have provided instruction and guidance in specific program practices through individual coaching sessions, modeled lessons within individual classrooms, and a range of workshops targeting specific practices ranging from genre studies to creation of materials.

Concomitantly, there have been numerous forums designed to foster problem solving within the literacy context. Many of these have been formally structured such as grade level discussions of implementation progress, after school study groups in which teachers have been paid stipends for participation,

and faculty meetings which have provided time for a sharing of successes and concerns related to the implementation of First Steps. Other forums, like luncheon meetings, emerged spontaneously when teachers were encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning.

> *We lunch in the room. We talk to each other. We learn together. When I am having difficulty with a child, I ask, "What do you think will help me? I show the way I do it and the other teachers will try to help me. We work together, no one is expected to know it all. (Teacher Interview, 1/14/97)*

Corroborating current research findings (McLaughlin, 1990; Hargreaves, 1996, Fullan, 1991) teachers reported that they valued these institutionally supported opportunities for ongoing learning. Furthermore, they used terms like "validated" "motivated", "invigorated" in describing the district commitment to the process. The data from our four schools indicates that First Steps professional development experiences have enhanced teachers' belief in their own efficacy and their belief that their school culture a sense of professionalism. While district tutors (teachers chosen to be professional developers) at first found teachers reluctant to invite them into their classrooms, by the end of the year, they found the invitations pouring forth. One tutor, new to the role of professional development and quite troubled by the teachers' initial responses to her offers of support, described her year-end experience:

> *I cannot believe how much positive feedback I have gotten from the people I worked with. Even people whose classrooms I never entered have been coming up to thank me for being there and helping them.*

When I said to them, "But I really have not done anything with you." they answered, "Oh yes you have. When we listened to our colleagues and learned what you shared with them, we felt supported by you too" (Tutor Interview, 6/97).

It is important to note that in many ways the implementation of First Steps in Southtown was a grass roots movement. Teachers were partners in the implementation decision. The data indicates that the enthusiasm of the teachers - as well as that of the administrators - grew out of a belief that this curriculum innovation would provide "a missing piece" in Southtown's existing literacy curriculum goals; it would help teachers to connect assessment to instruction. Ongoing administrative support - at both district and building level - including allocation of time and money for initial training and funding of tutors in the 1995-96 and 96-97 academic years served to validate teachers' professional identities as well as their actual professional knowledge of the field.

Insights Gained through Observation of the Implementation Process

The presence of these indicators and the resultant enthusiasm nonetheless tells only one part of the story. The greater context in which these indicators were enacted and the actual way they played out are equally relevant to the success of the implementation. As we analyzed the data documenting the enactment of the First Steps professional development model, we began to recognize some potential obstacles to significant change in literacy practices and outcomes. The variations in classroom implementation of First Steps practices that we saw and heard about could, in part, - as suspected - be attributed to the knowledge base and belief systems of the individual teachers. However, this

explanation alone does not suffice. The data suggests that the continuing presence of these variations appears to be also related to the knowledge base and belief systems of the professional developers, both insiders and outsiders. For the purpose of discussing this data, we identify the First Step personnel as the outsiders and district and school based personnel as the insiders.

Knowledge and Beliefs Considered

The Outsiders (First Steps Personnel)

The data consistently reports how much Southtown teachers respect the First Steps personnel; they find the professional dialogue rich and meaningful. Nonetheless, a problem arose from the assumptions underlying the professional development sessions. These assumptions led First Steps trainers to confuse a shared lexicon of literacy terminology with a shared philosophy of literacy. Consequently they believed that they shared with Southtown teachers a common understanding of the ways in which literacy practices could and should be enacted. Failure to examine the ways in which teachers were operationalizing their existing literacy philosophy led First Steps personnel to assume mistakenly that certain practices were in place.

First Steps personnel assumed that most, if not all, Southtown teachers:

- engaged in both long and short term curriculum planning
- viewed the development of reading, writing, and language arts as integrated processes and structure their instruction accordingly
- allocated opportunities for students to write on a regular, sustained basis

- viewed writing as a process in which systematic instruction in cognitive strategies as well as skills is embedded in meaningful contexts that build upon students' existing skills and interests

While these assumptions were consistent with the articulated district policy regarding literacy curriculum, the reality, nonetheless, is that they do not hold true in many classrooms.

In additions, a second problematic set of beliefs held by First Steps personnel emerges in the data. These relate to the ability of an individual school district to customize the First Steps professional development model to meet the strengths, skills, and needs of its teachers. First Steps does encourage districts to make the program their own, to use their resources in ways that extend the efficacy of the existing literacy curriculum, to set their own pace for implementation. They support district tutors in their efforts to design professional development procedures that most effectively meet the strengths and needs of their faculty.

First Steps personnel provide ongoing support to districts throughout the implementation process. However, recognition of whether a district's needs differ from the standard model of professional development and consideration of how these differences may be most effectively addressed is left to the initiative of the district. It is assumed that district personnel have the skill, knowledge, and sense of empowerment that will enable them to identify potential problems and make modifications as needed.

In the process that ensues, however, there is a tension that emerges between First Steps' desire to ensure programmatic integrity and the recognition that training needs to be flexible. Perhaps because of this, during the first year of our study, district tutors felt that they had little leeway in the materials and methods they could use to guide their colleagues in the philosophy and practices of First Steps. When asked to reflect on their experiences, district tutors commented that they felt as if "a transmissional model of professional development was being utilized to communicate a transactional model of literacy curriculum" (Tutor Focus Group, April, 1997).

The district tutors may not have felt skilled enough to identify the needs of their colleagues. They definitely did not feel knowledgeable enough to address these needs by deviating from the professional development activities and procedures that had been recommended and modeled by First Steps personnel. Perhaps, most important of all, they did not feel that they had the authority to act according to their instincts and experience. All of these factors shaped the ways in which they presented First Steps to their colleagues.

Insiders: District Based Professional Development Personnel (District Tutors)

One of the aspects of First Steps that is most compelling - ideologically and pragmatically - is the expectation that ongoing professional development will be provided by school and district based personnel. District tutors and focus teachers, school based support teachers, trained by First Steps assume the responsibility for extending and supporting the knowledge base of their colleagues. In Southtown, those chosen to be district tutors were highly

respected, experienced teachers; many of them had some experience as professional development personnel. However, none of the district tutors had first hand classroom experience with First Steps before they assumed their professional development responsibilities. Consequently, while they were steeped in the literature of the innovation and deeply committed to it, they were, nonetheless, learning as they were going.

The tutors were dealing with new content, new structures, and new roles at the very same moment that they were expected to teach others. They were given time to study and discuss the program, time to prepare for the teacher training sessions they would lead and the coaching and modeling they would do. However, they had no sustained opportunity to test out their interpretation of the literacy innovation with children before having to assume the role of "expert".

> *Tutor 1: This is a new program. No one has gone before us and set it up,. No one can tell us, 'This will happen and then this will happen and then it will work like this. We've got somebody coming from another country who tells us they have used it in their country and it has been successful. It looks good, but we have not been eyewitnesses to it.*
>
> *Tutor 2: It would be different if I had used this in my classroom. But, we have never used it in our own room and now we are going in to show somebody else how to use it. That is very difficult.*
>
> *Tutor 3: So, what this comes down to is we are asking teachers to trust us when we don't really trust ourselves. (Tutor Focus Group, Spring 1997)*

This lack of first hand experience with First Steps coupled with a strong commitment to and a sense of responsibility for its successful implementation created intensive anxiety in many of the tutors. This anxiety made them even more reluctant to take liberties with the guidelines for the training sessions they conducted. They felt as if it was their role to disseminate the information they had received adhering as closely as possible to the models they had observed during their own training.

Insiders: Central Office Administration

The enthusiasm with which Southtown teachers and administrators embraced First Steps was unanticipated. It was thought that five to ten schools would be interested in professional development during the first year. To everyone's amazement, by the fall of 1996, eighteen elementary schools requested training. This presented central office administrators with a dilemma. The surprising response pushed at the underpinnings of the existing district professional development plan. In an effort to satisfy the enthusiasm that was being shown, administrators overextended the commitment of their tutors, thus cutting the amount of time and support they could provide for individual classrooms. This proved highly problematic to tutors who were themselves novices. By underestimating the importance of experience and specific content knowledge in tutors' ability to support classroom teachers, the district overloaded the tutors and compromised their already vulnerable sense of efficacy.

The quick pace that emerged had a second problematic outcome. In their effort to meet the constantly growing demands for service that were coming from the schools, district administrators, themselves stressed by the unexpected response, were unable to find the time to build a cohesive team with the tutors.

Existing structures, such as weekly meetings designed for debriefing, which might have met this need proved to be a place for voicing concerns or preparing materials but not for building trust. As a result, tutors felt that their voices were not being heard. They felt as if the emergent model of professional development did not make use of what they were learning in the field. They saw their ability to develop working relationships with classroom teachers as compromised by shifting administrative priorities. "I don't have the time, the energy, or the power to give teachers what would be most helpful" (Tutor Focus Group, Spring, 1997).

Year 2 - New Understandings: Visions and Revisions

The story of the implementation of First Steps in Southtown does not, however, end at this point. As we move into the second year, the data indicates some potentially significant changes, changes that may well impact on the nature of literacy practice in many classrooms. First Steps personnel have recognized and begun to address their initial misconceptions. Growing experience has made them aware that - in classrooms across the country - even when teachers espoused beliefs are consistent with the assumptions of the First Steps program, the realities of their classroom practice may clash. First Steps personnel are rethinking their role and identifying new ways in which they can most effectively support teachers. These include:

- Recommending that tutors and focus teachers have classroom experience with First Steps for at least six months before assuming a professional development role
- Providing more guided instruction on planning - Initial training sessions as well as follow-up support workshops focus on training teachers to identify long term curriculum goals and, concomitantly, to do short term planning that works toward those goals.

- Articulating explicitly multiple ways in which materials and methodology included in Tutor Training Manuals can be used in diverse ways to meet the needs of teachers

The district administration has also recognized and acknowledged the need for adjustment. Reflecting on year one of the implementation of First Steps, district administrators acknowledge that teachers need more support than they had first thought. They have come to see that changing teachers' literacy practices is a complex process that will take time. District administrators credit the First Steps program and its support personnel for, upon being asked, helping them to identify and address specific areas of strength and need.

Faced with an unanticipated budget crunch, the district was forced to eliminate the positions of district - based tutors. Instead, they are turning to focus teachers, classroom teachers or reading resource teachers in participating schools whose responsibilities include serving as First Steps resources to their peers. From a professional development position, administrators see "developing the focus teachers as the single most important thing we can do." To this end, district level monthly meetings have been scheduled to address identified needs. There is a recognition that the implementation of First Steps is an emergent process and that not only teachers but building principals and district administrators are also emerging in their understanding of the process. Along with this comes a recognition that, while a great deal has been accomplished in the first year of implementation, it may take time to reap the full benefits of First Steps.

Finally, the tutors, too, have revised their vision. When funding cuts eliminated their district positions, five of the original six tutors assumed the role of focus teachers in school settings. As year two begins, each appears to be significantly more comfortable in her leadership role. Former district tutors feel

discouraged by the structural changes that have been made but remain committed to their belief in the importance of First Steps. Freer to follow their own instincts, armed with the insights gained from last year's experiences, and more knowledgeable about the content of the First Steps program, they have a better sense of how First Steps can enhance the literacy practices of individual teachers and how they can be instrumental to that end.

Implications for the Field

The data to date confirms Allington's statement that literacy research has been conducted in a "too small box". It supports the notion that literacy programs cannot be deemed effective or ineffective on the basis of their philosophy or their design alone; context is crucial. Equally crucial is the recognition that teachers' may unwittingly implement practices that are not consonant with their espoused beliefs.

These findings raise some fundamental questions:

1. How can we as teacher educators, researchers, administrators, professional developers, and literacy resource teachers help teachers to understand the relationship between espoused beliefs and actual classroom practices?

2. How can we be certain that the assumptions on which teacher education and professional development models in the field of literacy are based match the reality of actual classroom practice? And, if they do not, what can we do to modify existing innovative programs without compromising their underlying goals and vision.

3. How can we help teachers, administrators, and ourselves to recognize that reality testing, trust building, and the skills of teamsmanship are essential components of the world of literacy?

4. How can we help teachers and administrators to balance the need for immediate change in both teacher practices and student outcomes with the recognition that change is a process - in ourselves and in our students?

The data confirms that the process of change, especially in regard to literacy practices, will take time. New learning is often resisted before it is welcomed. In the words of William James (1906, p.11):

> *Our minds thus grow in spots; and like grease spots, the spots spread. But we let them spread as little as possible: we keep unaltered as much of our old knowledge, as many of our old prejudices and beliefs, as we can.*

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